

**March 11, 2008**

**Public Testimony for Bill No. 5024  
An Act Concerning the Establishment of a Cultural Treasures Account**

**Public Testimony for the Committee on Commerce**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: I am Marcia Mersky, Director of Development and I am speaking on behalf of Westport Country Playhouse. Joanne Woodward and Anne Keefe are the Co-Artistic Directors, and Jodi Schoenbrun Carter is the Managing Director. I am here to speak in favor of Bill Number 5024.

For 78 years, the Westport Country Playhouse has played a vital role in American theatre. The Playhouse is an essential element of Connecticut's cultural community, and is recognized locally and nationally as a center for entertainment and artistic enrichment.

The funding that is to be provided through the proposed legislation is essential to the Playhouse since it represents critical *operating support* in an environment where most other support must be targeted for specific programs. Our operating budget of over \$6 million is supported through ticket sales, which, like other theatres across the county, covers only about half of our annual operating budget. The increased support through this proposed legislation would help us to pay for productions and education programs that enlighten, enrich and engage a diverse community of theatre lovers, artists and students.

In addition to the 7 main stage productions spread over a year-round calendar, we also offer many other cultural and educational opportunities, serving Fairfield County and beyond and drawing an annual attendance of over 85,000 people.

Cultural vibrancy helps attract and sustain businesses and the highly skilled professionals that are key to Connecticut's continued success. The Playhouse hosts many business events in our space, including everything from meetings in the theatre, to the rental of our campus for corporate events that include attendance of our performances.

Since 1946, the Playhouse has been actively training the next generation of theatre professionals through our Woodward Intern and Apprentice program, a hands-on, season long training program. The proposed funding would help support this program in which the interns are provided with a weekly stipend, housing and are offered an opportunity to participate in every facet of theatre operations. We attract young professionals from colleges all across the country and many have returned to fill permanent staff positions and live in the region. Four current staff members at the Playhouse started as interns. Our

internship program has trained theatre legends such as Stephen Sondheim, Tammy Grimes, Mary Rodgers and Larry Hagman.

In 2007 we initiated a three year Playmaking Workshop which pairs Westport middle school students with Norwalk students selected through the Norwalk Housing Authority. These two groups work first separately and then join together in pairs to create short plays which ultimately are performed by professional actors on the Playhouse stage with family and members of the community in the audience. Graduates of the program are eligible to participate in our Apprentice program, providing a chance to pursue a career that they may never have imagined.

We also offer Professional Development Workshops for new teachers, giving them the skills at the beginning of their careers to use the arts as a part of their teaching repertoire.

Our Theatre Access fund offers subsidized tickets and transportation to students and seniors who would be otherwise unable to attend performances.

Our PlayClub, offered in partnership with Westport Library, is a book club for reading plays.

We also offer family programming for parents with elementary and middle school children.

One of the challenging issues facing Connecticut today is attracting and retaining young professionals in our workforce. Fairfield County ranks in the top ten most expensive places to live, and needs to provide both affordable housing and the types of amenities that young people are seeking. The Playhouse faces the same issues. Affordable housing is a challenge for our younger staff members and for housing interns and artists. We are also working hard to attract a younger audience. Recently the Playhouse hosted a Young Professional's night. We had a band and complimentary refreshments in our lobby prior to the performance, and offered discounted tickets to an invited group of 20 - 40 year olds in an initiative to draw a more diverse group to our performances and develop future audiences. The evening was a huge success. We will continue to offer this event in the future, and look for other ways to reach to potential new audiences.

This is just a sampling of what we have to offer. We are constantly developing new programs and partnerships so that we can continue to be a gathering place and cultural landmark, and to contribute to the vitality and economic strength of Fairfield County.

All of this would be enhanced by passage of the *Act Establishing A Cultural Treasures Account*. We urge you to vote for its passage.

Thank you.

Marcia Mersky

Director of Development